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AUTHOR Luangpraseut, Khamchong
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ABSTRACT

This booklet about the cultural background of Laos is one of three booklets that serve as a foundation for understanding the cultural diversity and values of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese students. Laos is a country of great cultural and ethnic diversity. The following political and economic factors have influenced the development of modern Laos: (1) Laos is the only landlocked Southeast Asian country; (2) the economy is based on primitive agriculture; (3) the population is centered in small, scattered villages, always near a river; and (4) the country is a "buffer state" between neighboring countries and has suffered from constant warfare. Brahmanism, spirit worship, and Buddhism have influenced the Lao conception of the universe. Human beings are perceived as a complex mixture of animal and spiritual natures. Laotians believe in a reincarnational cycle in which the present life is regarded as one life among many. Celebrations and ceremonies are related to the life stages of child, adolescent, adult, and parent. The elementary and secondary secular school system is based on the French system, but most Laotians prefer the Buddhist temple schools, which emphasize spiritual development. Most literature is presented orally. Due to geographic and religious limitations, the Lao people know little about life beyond their immediate villages. Descriptions of four major holidays, one chart, and one map are included. A 32-item bibliography is appended. (FMW)

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KHAMCHONG LUANGPRASEUT

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Laos, for the last six hundred years, has been known to her people as *RASSANACHAK LANXANG HOM KHAO*, otherwise *THE KINGDOM OF A MILLION ELEPHANTS UNDER THE WHITE PARASOL*. Laos has always been a land of multi-ethnic culture. By necessity, this part of *LAOS CULTURALLY SPEAKING* will deal with the LAO and their culture, exclusively.

SABAAI DEE
HELLO
I AM A LAO.
HOW DO YOU DO?

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

You have probably noticed that the word "Introduction" was written down *three* times. If so, you might have already asked yourself the question "why?" If you have done that, and further tried to discover or develop within yourself all possible reasonings behind that intriguing number without being able to decide which one would be the right answer, then I must presume that you had been an Asian at least once in your previous lives, possibly as an erudite pundit!

But if you have not, don't let that bother you now. Anyway, you are graciously invited to cross the border into an Oriental way of thinking. In fact, in the Asian mind all details, while apparently meaningless to a Westerner, and all nuances, no matter how small they seem to be, may frequently reflect a more profound philosophical thought or a very humane motivation in the person who expresses them. You will spot many such details in your verbal and non-verbal communication with Laotians or Asians in general. Sometimes they may reveal to you the existence of another and totally different system of values, even a different concept of the whole universe. Please pay close attention to the numbers, the body-language, and the food. They contain many revealing details in those aspects mentioned above.

The next twelve chapters of rather short narratives will make a sincere attempt to draw your attention to the cultural particularity of the Lao, a major ethnic entity in Southeast Asia today. In their recent exodus, 100,000 Lao people have reached the United States of America. You will find out, if you do not already know, that in Laos, not all the Laotians are ethnically Lao and speak Lao (the national and official language of Laos), and that the Lao are not culturally linked to China but to India. Laos is not a rich country in terms of materialistic wealth, but you will find smiling people all over the land. It was reported quite often that visiting or traveling foreigners could easily tell when they had entered the territory of the *Kingdom of A Million Elephants* because Laotians smile. Is there any hidden philosophy behind those smiling faces? What is the traditional Lao life style in remote villages? How is the Lao family really structured? What are the implications of all this for the education of the Lao children in American schools? These and other questions will

bring about many other thoughts and reflections of my own which, hopefully, will provide you with some guidance in understanding the Lao culture in general, and perhaps minimum assistance to your noble teaching assignment.

To be closer to the Asian philosophical mood, let's go back to the numbers for a while. They are so different in Asian cultures. The number *three*, for instance, is exceptionally revealing. It tells us how the traditional Chinese perceive their universe. Heaven is on the top, the Earth on the bottom, and the people are in between. The Chinese reverence, with three traditional bows of the head, reflects, par excellence, their concept of reality. Another example: before coming to say their proper prayer, all Buddhist laymen would kneel down three times, each time reciting the same and identical *namo tassa...* formula. However, each time they kneel down they address themselves to a different authority. The first *namo* reverence is always directed to the Buddha himself, the second goes to the Holy Script containing the Buddhist Teachings, and the third and last reverence goes to the bonzes (Buddhist monks). Clearly this order gives us an idea of what the hierarchy system looks like in Buddhism. Moreover, it tells us the methodology and dialectics of a Buddhist mind. The Lao, not accidentally, gave a name to this Buddhist principle known as the *three diamonds*. One last example, the use of sacred threads with mystical knots for curing or self-protecting purposes, is common to the folklore of many human races. However in India, a Brahman from Madras will usually wind a cord of threads three times round his knee before he makes his special knot. The cord itself must be made of three fine threads and twisted together.

Realistic? Analytical or Mystical? Whatever we may think of the numbers, we must know that in many Asian cultures some of the numbers do have a controlling and commanding power over various aspects of the human lives of the natives.

Just a last word of warning before we set our foot on the land of the smiling Lao and enter their universe. Go in peace and *forget your time*. Time, in the sense of Western civilization, has very little meaning to the basic patterns of the traditional Lao values. Certainly not the amount of tic-tocs, not the months nor even years are important in judging the life of a human being on earth. To a very traditional Lao mind, precisely, it is not time that makes a human's life more valuable. The life itself and its achievements impart a value to any given time.

Many of the Lao traditions and values are supreme. As you read the following pages on a few aspects of the Lao culture, try to sympathize with some or even identify yourself with parts of

them. We know very little about each other, but we do know that human races, while differing from one another in cultural practices, do have the same basic earthly concerns, namely: the safety for life, the need for cooperation, the sense of what is beautiful, and the necessity to indicate affection for loved ones.

Finally, if you seem to have the impression that the Lao actually are relatively unaffected by the Western civilization, you are absolutely right. Furthermore, if you cannot associate their miserable life with their smiling faces, there is nothing wrong with you. They smile because they are Lao. Is that not a reason?

Chapter I

LAO, LAOS, AND LAOTIANS

In 1967, after an extensive tour across the region, a well-known American columnist decided to publish a book on Southeast Asia. The book which was called *Southeast Asia* contains many enlightening details. As you read what the author had to say about Southeast Asians, listen carefully to his frustration. He wrote:

> *When a Thai or Vietnamese farmer is asked where his people originated, he is apt to reply that they have always lived in this village because he can, after all, remember his grandfather. Throughout Southeast Asia tradition may be supreme, but time has little meaning. Early Chinese and European travelers who roamed this region kept records, now important sources for Western scholars, but the Southeast Asian themselves were indifferent to history. What they knew or cared about in the past came down to them not in any systematic account, but in myths and legends that were, to their ears, just awesome or charming or literary magic.*

That frustrated American was Mr. Stanley Karnow. Mr. Karnow's reaction to our reality was most sincere. It is very apparent that the most important and pressing factors for him, as a Westerner, were factual information and *time*. Unfortunately, not too many people sense that Asian farmers actually live their lives and do not measure time. The majority of Asians would like to give sense to their own lives. Time is no obstacle because they have their whole lives to achieve their goals. If they cannot accomplish everything in this life, they believe they will improve the situation in the next life. There are many things that an Asian wishes to accomplish in his present life, but he will not attempt to make history out of his own life. Their existence is history itself. In that sense, the Southeast Asians are certainly not so indifferent to history as they might appear to be at the first sight.

Many of Mr. Karnow's expressed thoughts actually reflect the true nature of the problems with which any scholar would encounter in Southeast Asia, and perhaps not only in Southeast Asia. Mr. Karnow is no stranger to the Laotians and he is their friend. I had the pleasure to meet him six years ago, right here,

in Santa Ana. He was about to publish a 6,000 word long article on the Hmong people, my other highly regarded compatriots. We were discussing the Hmong, as refugees, and problems related to their resettlement in the United States. I always view the Hmong as a dynamic people. Perhaps we will have other occasions to look more closely into their cultural and historical background and to share ideas as to what should be or could be expected of them in terms of contribution to this great and generous nation.

Indeed, the past of the Laotians did not come down to us in any systematic account. May they, however, hope that in a more distant future their present uneasy situation, not always generated by the Laotian themselves, will be thoroughly and accurately recorded so that *history* can never again be used to justify the self-expansionist purposes of nations? Right now, however, let's get ourselves ready for our planned excursion into the Lao culture.

WHERE DID THE LAO ORIGINATE FROM?

Many Lao, I am afraid, won't be able to tell you their grandparents' names because they really don't know them. If some do, don't expect them to be better informed than the others about the Lao people and how, in the distant past, they came about to resettle themselves in the places where they are now. As a matter of fact, nobody knows the exact origins of the Lao people. For many generations, the Lao were told by Western historians, mostly French or French born, that their Lao ancestors came from the Mongolian mountains, had lived in China and traveled southwards, and then finally had crossed the Chinese border to install themselves in a territory which is more or less covered by present-day Laos.

Records and a multitude of evidences, mainly Chinese, were produced to support such a thesis. Most recently, however, by applying very complicated linguistic tools, some American researchers have concluded to the great surprise of all that the Lao as well as all the Tai ethnic groups did not come from China nor Mongolia. They were first born, according to the same source, in an area called *Muong Theng*. Muong Theng used to be a part of Laos and it means, in the Lao language, *Paradise Country*. The Lao tradition also says that the Lao people originated in that valley. Subsequently, Muong Theng, the once Lao *Paradise Country*, has become a North Vietnamese town under a new name: Dien Bien Phu. Dien Bien Phu could very well mean *Hell Country* to the French because a major and decisive battle was

fought there in 1954. The outcome? It was the political requiem of French colonial power in Indochina.

I do not know how much credit could be given this American theory on the historical birth place of the Lao people; nor can I tell how well the Lao legend itself is founded. Anyway, not too many years ago, an extraordinary archaeological discovery in Northeast Thailand unearthed pots or urns which are said to be more than five thousand years old. Moreover, grains of rice were found in those pots. I visited the Ban Xieng archaeological site, near the town of Udorn, in late 1974 and exchanged a few words with an American archaeologist from the University of Pennsylvania doing research over there. He was quite confident about the earlier reported existence of those grains. Well, if the rice in the 5,000 year old pot is a true story, the implications could be very far reaching. The Lao and other Indochinese peoples could thus be older than the Chinese themselves because the Chinese had started to eat rice at a much later date. It may also explain why rice is not so popular in far northern regions of China while it is the main dish in the South.

Anyway, many Lao certainly wish the American theory were true. Their pride and peaceful image are at stake. Pride because the Lao may then claim that they came from nowhere. Relief, because the Lao are tired of wars and atrocities and don't like to be reminded by history textbooks that their ancestors might have been invaders and had to chase the many Kha tribes and the Chams into the highlands so that the Lao themselves could have the rivers and the fertile plains for their own existence. Many Lao cannot know how much they owe other Laotians (Kha, Khmu, Iu-Mien,...) for their own existence. Therefore, those Lao who know about themselves also know that the past cannot be corrected but they sincerely wish the future to be wide open.

WHO ARE THE LAO?

The word *Lao* has many meanings. *Lao*, as a noun, means (1) an ethnic entity belonging to the Tai family in Southeast Asia, (2) the language spoken by the Lao ethnic entity, and (3) the person belonging to the Lao ethnic group.

The Lao, *as an ethnic entity*, is very closely linked to the Siamese. Today the Siamese call themselves Thai. Actually, the Lao, the Siamese or the Black Tais are all *Thai*. The Lao were traditionally called *the Laotian Thai* and the Siamese, *the Siamese Thai*. However, since the Kingdom of Siam has just recently become Thailand (1939) and, to avoid unnecessary semantic

confusion, the term *Tai* was created to replace the traditional spelling *That*. Some scholars prefer *Tai* to *Tai*, but, fortunately, it really has the same meaning.

The Lao, *as a language*, is a written language. Lao is the national and official language of Laos (Article 6, Constitution). Lao is spoken by approximately twenty million people in Southeast Asia. Only two million of them are inside Laos (Lao has a total population of about four million). Surprised? Sixteen million are in Northeast Thailand while the other Lao speakers are in all neighboring countries.

Many centuries ago, the literary Lao language was so rich in style, vocabulary, and technicality that it was elaborate enough to sense and faithfully describe the splendor of the ancient Hindu literature. Therefore, in early days the Lao language could even give birth to its own Lao version of the celebrated *Ramayana*. History has changed all that. No literary books of quality were written in Lao in the last 200 years. Much harm has been done to the Lao language under the French colonial administration. In the late sixties, the United States Agency for International Development undertook a very substantial step to try to reverse the situation. Four million Lao textbooks were published and a whole secondary educational program entitled "Fangum System" was taught in the native language. Nevertheless, the Lao language has suffered too much and too long. Consequently, as it stands today, the Lao language may not fulfill even the basic needs of educational curriculum beyond the junior high school level.

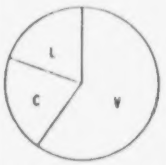
This is the main reason why the lack of qualified translators and writers of the Lao language is so visible and painfully felt in all school districts throughout the United States. There is no doubt in my mind that the Lao language is in a deep crisis. The absence of Lao books and readable newspapers in the United States is more than symptomatic. Yet the language is so beautiful and so poetic. Listen to the word *thank you* in Lao. It sounds like *khop chai*. *Khop* means *frame*, and *chai* means *the heart*. It paints gratitude with charming colors by saying *You are going to be remembered in the frame of my heart*. A father in-law is called *Pho ta*, the *father with eyes* while a mother in-law is called *Mae naai* or *the mother with orders*. How can a family situation be more explicitly describable? There are approximately one hundred thousand Laotian refugees in the United States. This number is self-explanatory as to the need for the language itself. May I hope that you and your friends would express your sympathy in an eventual undertaking to revive this beautiful language in this beautiful land?

The Lao, *as a person*, differs in many ways from other citizens of Laos descending from non-Lao origin. A Lao has a long, long name. If possible, he prefers to eat sticky rice three times a day. Fish, vegetables and a large quantity hot peppers are the usual ingredients of his menu. His beloved musical instrument is called the *khen*, a mouth organ made of bamboo tubes which he plays in evening courting-sessions (social activity hours). A Lao is not a great traveller and traditionally cannot live too far away from the river, any river. Rivers not only provide the Lao with food, they are their "freeways" and have substantially shaped their way of life. The Lao systematically pursue their two most important goals in life: religious merit for the sake of an eventual future life, and personal pleasure on earth for a more practical purpose of life. Flexibility and relativity are important elements in a Lao mind. They produce that moderation in attitude which is so characteristic of the Lao people. The smiling faces, already mentioned earlier, are the expression of the same philosophy.

The word *Lao, as an adjective*, should not be mistaken with another adjective: *Laotian*. The first denotes qualities or disqualities of the Lao ethnics and only the Lao ethnics. The second denotes the qualities and disqualities of the Laotians, which includes every citizen of Laos, whether he or she has descended from a Lao or non-Lao origin. For instance, Laotian food may consist of many kinds of food from different ethnic groups, but the Lao food has to be really Lao. *Padek*, a strongly smelling fermented fish is a Lao delight which not every Laotian can eat. A plain-water soup consisting of only fresh water in a bowl is very popular among the Hmong people. You may call it a Laotian soup because a Hmong is a Laotian. But actually, no Lao that I know has fully appreciated the freshness and the cooling effect of the water mixed with rice in a bowl. The Lao would always says it is a Hmong soup.

You have learned what is Lao and what is not Lao. Therefore, you may no longer say *Do you speak Laotian?* Instead, you will ask *Do you speak Lao?* because there is no Laotian language, but there are Laotian languages. The Hmong tongue as well as Khmu, Iu-Mien, Tai, etc. are all Laotian languages. Also, you will no longer ask a person if she or he is a "Laotian or Hmong?" because a Hmong from Laos is a Laotian. The right question should be: *Are you a Laotian?* If the person says *Yes*, and if you would like to know more of the person's cultural background or language, then ask: *Are you a Lao or a Hmong or a Khmu etc...* The same thing will apply to songs, musical instruments and garments. This is a purely semantic convention. Not everyone

agrees upon it, but I sincerely hope this short discussion will assist you to see the difference between the various ethnic groups from Laos. The Lao, Khmu, Hmong etc... are Laotians. The Laotians are Indochinese, so are the Cambodians and the Vietnamese. The Indochinese are Southeast Asians, the Indonesians are Southeast Asians as well, but they are not Indochinese. Indochina is a region. Indonesia is a country. The chart next page is just a memo intended to clear up any possible confusion in these terminologies. Please read from left to right.

Country or Region	LAOS	INDOCHINA : Three countries	SOUTHEAST ASIA : Nine countries.
People	LAOTIANS	INDOCHINESE	SOUTHEAST ASIANS.
Ethnicity and Citizenship		CAMBODIANS (C) 69,898 sq.m. LAOTIANS (L) 91,430 sq.m. VIETNAMESE (V) 128,052 sq.m. 	BURMESE: 35,306,189 CAMBODIANS : 6,684,000 FILIPINOS : 53,170,000 INDONESIANS : 161,579,500 LAOTIANS: 4,033,000 MALAYSIANS : 15,269,600 SINGAPOREANS : 2,529,100 THAIS : 49,515,100 VIETNAMESE : 52,741,766
Population in 1984.	4,033,000	63,458,766	380,828,255
Location			
Area in sq. m.	91,430	289,380	1,733,444
National official language	LAO	KHMER (C) LAO (L) VIETNAMESE(V)	

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LAOS, POLITICALLY AND ECONOMICALLY

The analysis of all major problems of Laos lies beyond the scope of our present cultural materials. However, some basic understandings of the Laotian political and economic systems are necessary to assist us in our findings about the Lao culture. The following preliminary notes should provide you with a few ideas.

1. Laos is not Switzerland. *Not to have* an access to the sea is a great disadvantage to an overall development for the country. Laos is the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia. The country is mountainous and as much as sixty percent of Laos' total land surface is covered by thick forests. She has two climatic zones. A hot summer and a cool winter are characteristic for upper Laos. In this part of the country, winter temperatures below freezing are not exceptional. No house is equipped with a heating system, and many inhabitants have no shoes. On the other hand, middle and lower Laos are situated in the tropical and subtropical zone with exuberant evergreen vegetation. In general, the physical geography and the geology does not reveal any substantial difference between Laos and the remaining Indochinese countries.

2. In the traditional kingdom of Laos, the State is the nominal owner of land. According to Laotian Law, he who cultivates land is its utilizer, not its owner. But in reality, in the hill territories, land is generally regarded as belonging to the rural community, while in the lowlands each peasant is actually the owner of the land he is cultivating.

Unfortunately, however, the burden of ancient tradition hinders the Laotian peasants from realizing the advantages of modern agricultural science and techniques. Most of the Laotian peasants are still unable to understand that higher crop yield may be obtained without changing the rice field, the water and the buffalo. Many are still convinced that the crops depend on the proper observance of rituals in honor of various *phi*, the powerful spirits.

Ninety percent of the Laotian population are farmers. Rice is everything. For centuries, the rice farming has been closely related to a definite season dependent on rain. In the *ray* system, the chief preparation of soil to be tilled consists in burning down the forest prior to the rainy season which starts in June. Sowing is done right at the beginning of the wet period.

No agrotechnical operation is undertaken until harvest time. The system is widely known as the *slash-and-burn* farming system and is applied in many varying forms according to the local traditions or individual ingenuity of the peasants. As a rule the same field is not used for very long. The Hmong farmers particularly will move on to a new area often. The worked-out land is abandoned and the *ray* farmers then settle in other areas and start the burning process anew.

It is not necessary to be reminded that the slash-and-burn system is devastating the forests. In general, the productivity of Laotian farmers is very low, probably the lowest in Southeast Asia. The low average productivity of labor of the individual peasant is due to the primitive character of work implements at his disposal. The almost lack of haste while working is another factor. A Polish author depicting peasant economy in India once wrote: *Three shepherds will look after one sheep and the peasant following the wooden plough will stop every now and then to count the larks in the sky.*

Perhaps matters are not that bad in Laos. Yet, the Laotian peasant living under the conditions of family economy does not need to work faster than is absolutely necessary to satisfy the family's demand. Thus, his farming activities may depend on his pleasure or mood. The water buffalo, the main draught force in Laotian farming, is notorious for its predilection for prolonged slumber in cool mud as well as its slow pace; however, the Lao peasant's working pace, I am afraid, often seems still slower. The lack of irrigation and the slow working pace are not only factors affecting the insignificant level of productivity of labor. The *impossibility of finding employment outside agriculture* is probably the most important factor of all. The industry? Industry is almost nonexistent.

3. The Lao are people of plains and valleys. They are scattered over the territory and dwell in small villages, always along a river. Thus, the groups of settlements are not so far removed from one another as in the hills with the Hmong or Iu-Mien people. The distance between the individual Lao villages is relatively much shorter. Yet their economy, too, cannot be said to depend to any great extent on the existence of a market. Barter or commercial exchanges seldom go beyond the limits of a purely local concern. One of the reasons for this is the fact that each farm generally cultivates the same plants and the amount of production is limited solely to the needs of the family. The plants most commonly cultivated in the lowlands, plains and valleys are: rice, corn, sweet potatoes, manioc, lemons, oranges,

bananas, papaya, sugar cane, tobacco, cotton, coffee, tea, cucumbers, and ground nuts.

4. Most of the existing history textbooks will tell you that the Laotian kingdom formation started in 1353 with the ascendancy of King Fa-Ngum. It is unfair. How could it be? Fa-Ngum himself had thirty-five rulers preceding him. The very first king, defeated by Fa-Ngum before his accession in 1353, was the latter's own grandfather: Souvanna Khamphong. Anyway this is not the place nor the time to argue about it. What we should know about the political history of Laos could be said in just one sentence. It is the story of a buffer zone and how its rivaling administrators are incompetent most of the time.

The continuing political conflict on Laotian soil is nothing new to the Laotians themselves. No matter how incompetent the Laotian rulers might have been, reasons for this permanent hostility situation in Laos are not to be found in Laos and among Laotians alone. The real conflict has to be viewed as the many centuries old conflict between the Imperial Vietnam and the Siamese Kingdom (Thailand). In the ancient days, Vietnam was much more influenced by the Chinese culture, while the Siamese and other people on the Mekong Valley were very much Indianized. At a later date important mineral resources, such as gold and silver, were found in the Mekong Valley. Subsequently, the region was very attractive to France. Laos, on the other hand, has always been a sparsely populated country. The interests of colonial France coincided totally with the ambition of the Vietnamese imperial rulers. The French were superior in military technology, therefore, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos consequently became French colonies under the same name: *French Indochina*. Not until the outcome of the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 did the three countries become independent.

Unlike Vietnam and Cambodia, Laos did not inherit any substantial "colonial heritage" after the occupiers were driven away. After almost sixty years of the French presence in Laos, almost all that was left were 1,500 miles of slightly improved roads, one high school, one military and one civilian hospital, some medical first-aid stations, some administration building, and military barracks. Out of the existing roads only one is of economic importance to the Laotians. This is the North-South Axis Road Number 13. The remaining ones are strategic roads built with the view to meet French colonial military interests (today, they serve the expansionist policy of the North Vietnamese Communists very efficiently).

Anyway after the French departure from Indochina, three

mutually hostile political groups in Laos led by three rival Lao princes, contended for ascendancy. Two of the princes are half-brothers, the other one is their cousin. The Geneva Conference of 1954 committed Laos to neutrality. In spite of that the three princes were committed to serve, each one in the interest of his respective "big brother". Typically, one was pro-French, his half brother took the opposite stand and was pro-communist, and the last one was pro-American. The pro-American one was, unfortunately for U.S. foreign policy, one of the most corrupt and authoritarian Lao princes in the history of the kingdom. Suddenly, in 1960, a 27-year old captain seized power and attempted to bring Laos back to neutrality as defined by the 1954 Geneva Agreement. In those days, however, the U.S. State Department was still very much in line with the philosophy which was so famous for denouncing any political neutrality as immoral. Thus the young Laotian officer could not obtain critically needed backing from the U.S. government. In spite of his true patriotism, due mainly to his obvious lack of political experiences, he became a political tool in the hands of the North Vietnamese Communists. In 1964, after the fall of the captain, one Laotian general after another attempted to get control of the country, and not so much for the country itself. Finally, their own boss who was the prime minister of Laos during all this time changed his mind once again. This time, the pro-French prince, previously mentioned, decided to invest his premiership with the Laotian Communists. A self-destructive agreement with the Communists was first signed and joyfully celebrated in 1973 after another famous U.S. Secretary of State had surrendered himself peacefully that same year in the historical negotiation talks in Paris. Two years later, in 1975, while Laotians were celebrating their traditional Lao New Year, Cambodia and then South Vietnam fell into Communist hands. A few weeks later, the Laotian exodus started.

A final word on this extremely sad period of the modern history of Laos. It is truly difficult to survive with honor and dignity in a buffer state such as the kingdom of Laos. But we, the Laotians, especially our leaders, did not fulfill our obligations in difficult times. Our allies, on the other hand, should not have put that much responsibility on Laotian leaders who belonged to the "pre-independence generation" and had contradictory family clan interests which, generally speaking, did not coincide with the interests of the other strata of the Laotian society.

Regretfully enough, the younger Laotian generation did not do better. They had very little knowledge of their own cultural and historical background. The Western education, notably the

French, had taught us nothing about patriotism and the supreme value of many indigenous traditions. Instead, the young Laotian students were busy learning about the new materialistic culture which stressed making as much money as possible in the shortest amount of time. Therefore, their self-interests always came first, and their unfitness to govern the country was notorious. Fortunately, not all were good students of this new culture.

Chapter II

THE LAO AND THEIR UNIVERSE

If you should come to Laos in April you would probably find the weather too hot to walk in under the burning sun. With its average maximum of 93°F and the average minimum of 72.5°F, April, the fifth month of the Theravada Buddhist calendar, is the hottest month of the year. But April is one of the best seasons to visit the country because you would have a chance to see the elaborate ceremonies to release birds and animals, and to learn how the Lao people celebrate the departure of the old year.

If you should wait until June you would risk the heavy rains which won't stop until the second half of October. You would find mud everywhere. Also, many of the few existing roads throughout the country are closed to communication. In fact, beginning in June the strong winds blow westward bringing thus the "sky waters" from the clouds of the South China Sea and pouring them on Laos between eleven and twelve inches per month. We Lao love the rain. The "sky waters" motivate our sticky rice to flourish in the fields and make our fruits grow without any contractual arrangement. You would also witness a multitude of ceremonies by our Lao peasants to induce the spiritual forces, the unseen supernatural beings to save them from disasters such as drought or too heavy storms which would kill their crops. Most of all, the rainy season in Laos is an excellent time to educate our children in the countryside where the absence of schools has been a rule rather than an exception. The Lao family life develops intensively during this period of time, and you would be surprised to observe how the monsoon rain has enriched the Lao literature and many other aspects of the Lao culture.

Whenever you choose to visit Laos you will never miss our Lao public expression of faith. Whether it rains or not, early in the morning, seven days a week, you will see the Lao people, in all towns, kneeling faithfully by the side of the road. Each family kneels before its own home, waiting for the Buddhist monks to pass by and collect their daily donated food. In villages, the Lao will bring the food to the pagoda itself. The Buddhist monks are not productive in the economic sense of the word. However, their philosophy of life and their non-descriptive norms of behavior have a critical impact on the Lao ways of life. This impact is so critical that nearly every large village or any sizable group of villages has its own pagoda. However popular, Buddhism is not

the unique guiding motivation behind the Lao life. There are many others, and it is only when they are combined that they constitute the pillars of the Lao universe. It is very interesting to see how the Lao mix rationality, magic, and religion. There are legends and tales reflecting this kind of melange of faiths. Here is one of the most beautiful and enlightening tales:

"Once in the immemorial time, there were two little birds, husband and wife, living in a rich, evergreen forest. They loved each other with an evergrowing passion and would rather stay all the time, days and nights, in their cozy nest. They talked lovingly and made a solemn promise to each other that they would never part. For a long time, life was wonderful for the two love birds. They spent their nights mostly wondering if other creatures, too, were as happy under the shining stars. They would leave their nest only when they were really hungry. As their love continued, so passed the time, and finally small eggs were also found in their lovely nest. The bird wife seemed to be hungry more often than ever, but could no longer accompany her beloved husband in searching for food. Therefore, she had to stay in the nest waiting and waiting. Every time he left, the husband's return seemed to be lasting longer than the previous one. Many concerns and anxieties came across her mind. From time to time the two birds kept renewing their solemn promise that no circumstances could make their separation possible.

But one day, a sudden tragedy took place in that forest. The forest caught fire. The bird husband was away searching for food, and the bird wife would not leave the nest behind with all those eggs, the results of their love which contained the life of their future children. The bird husband, after sensing the smoke, flew back to the nest immediately. The two birds became engulfed in the forest fire. The husband could not persuade the wife to escape. She preferred to die in the nest of their love, together with her eggs. The angry flames started to leap around them. So terrible were the flames that the bird husband decided to fly very high and escape alone without waiting for his wife. The poor bird wife watched the husband escaping. Just a few moments before she was burned to death, she kept thinking of the solemn promise they made more than once not to depart from each other. Still the husband escaped to save his own life. So she committed to herself for the last time, as a bird, that in her next life she would

never speak to a man. Her words were heard.

Sometime after that event, she was reborn, not as a bird but as a girl. Surprisingly enough, the bird husband, upon his death, was also reborn as a boy. The boy grew up naturally and developed himself to become, subsequently, a nice, good man with an extreme knowledge of charms and amulets. The girl generated many concerns to her parents who lived in a distant region and knew nothing about her former husband. She refused to associate herself with boys of her age and never talked to any man. Years went by and the girl became a woman, but still she did not address a single word to any man. Her parents were very worried for they knew that she would not find happiness in life. The young woman became ill when she reached the age of twenty, and she died thereafter. The news of her death was immediately known to the people living in the region, and from them the same news travelled to her former husband. The man came to see the family still mourning over the loss of their loved one. He said to the parents:

"Oh! My old people, don't cry! I have the right amulet which upon the correct usage will return the life to your daughter." He then took out a square amulet which he wore around his neck and murmured a few sacred words to the amulet and waved it over the dead body three times, from the heart to the head. Suddenly the girl came back to life, and to the surprise of many, she started to talk to all the men, young and old, who were there to mourn her own death. The amulet man was totally captivated by the girl's charming eloquence, and at the same time the revived young woman indicated an increasing interest in talking to the man. The two young people, therefore, did not need much time to fall in love with one another.

A few days later, a joyful ceremony was held in the village and the two lovers were pronounced husband and wife. They lived happily for the rest of their life. Sometimes the wife had a feeling that she had known her man before but could not remember exactly where or when. At other times the husband got the impression that they had been husband and wife before but could not understand how. Their feelings about the same past were so strong that they thought they had met each other in the previous life. Yet in spite of their impressions, they never knew for sure whether or not they had met each other before."

In almost all Lao legends and tales you will encounter *karma*, the Hindu theory on the transmigration of souls. At the same time, typically, magic and miracles will also be greatly emphasized because magic, as well as astrology,plays a very important role in the daily life of the Lao. However, there is always a place for human rationality in the legends of the Lao. The ending narrative of the story about the two birds was very conclusive in that aspect.

Now let us take a look at the Lao universe itself. The traditional Lao worlds are not heavenly bodies, not even the cosmos or the earth. The Lao worlds are invisible most of the time. They are closely associated with one another. Many of their inhabitants are said to be sharing the same space with humans. Among the most important are: the world of Naga where the King Dragon rules over all the waters and everything living within the rivers and oceans; the World of Garuda where the King Bird is responsible for every flying identity throughout the space (Garuda is believed to be the son of winds and can fly with the speed of light); the World of *Phi* where spirits, ghosts, demons and other supernatural beings live; and the World of Deva where angels and other divinities live. Humans and animals live on earth but belong to different worlds. People are the inhabitants of the World of Humans. Animals belong to the World of Animals, etcetera.

You can imagine the complexity of life for humans living in such a universe! One must know the rules for a peaceful coexistence among the inhabitants of all the worlds. Therefore, it is very important not to offend any of the supernatural powers, especially the *Phi*, if humans wish to have a long life on earth. Thus, spirit worship became very popular in Laos. This is the belief which maintains that spiritual and supernatural powers are present throughout the material and nonmaterial universe. Not only do those powers exist but also they can and will change the destinies of human beings if the *Phi* are not satisfied. The cult of Phi is so deeply ingrained in the Lao people that even now, in the United States, many Lao refugees are still keeping a small altar in their apartments or houses where occasional offerings can be made. Most Lao are convinced that the favor of the *Phi* is absolutely necessary for them to succeed in business or in any other enterprise.

Besides the Cult of *Phi*, Brahmanism is another philosophy which has a considerable influence on the life of Lao. Brahmanism or Hinduism holds that Brahma is a supreme being. He exists in several forms and may live different lives at the same time. The Lao are afraid and respectful of his powers. He is

simultaneously the Creator (Brahma), the Preserver (Vishnu), and the Destroyer (Siva). He has a different wife for each different form he manifests. For instance Kali, the wife of Siva is a cruel woman who has an incessant demand for human sacrifices. On the other hand, Sarasvati, the wife of Vishnu is the promoter of music and arts. Hinduism introduced *karma* to the Lao. *Karma* implies that human beings are living a temporary life. Life itself is nothing but a fatalistic interlude between other lives. Our next life will, therefore, be critically dependent on our behavior in the present. It is also through Brahmanism that the Lao have learned about the existence of the thirty-two souls who reside in the human body. The *Baci* ceremony, which is specifically related to this belief, is still being celebrated from time to time in all Lao families. You will find the ceremony beautiful and socially educational. There will be more about *Baci* in Chapter Six.

Another great philosophy which frames overall Lao life is Buddhism. Buddhism was founded by Gautama and by him alone. The Lao consider this one man to be the greatest teacher of all time. Buddhism is a mode of conduct which relies not upon revelation or any divine inspiration but rather upon logic. In short, this is how Buddhism came into being. Gautama was a Nepalese prince who lived some time around 500 B.C. At the age of thirty, Prince Gautama decided to abandon everything he had and went away from home to inspect his own soul. This was at the time when India was dominated by an extreme rigid form of Brahmanic Caste system. Gautama was an educated man. He sensed that there was not any hope for individual spiritual and social improvement to progress within such an extremely fatalistic caste system. Gautama was married but his wife, his crown, and his wealth were all left behind. He went everywhere that a man could manage to walk on his feet. It was during those trips deep into the Indian countryside that Prince Gautama became aware of the extreme poverty and devastating disease. He then set a goal of finding a way to escape the pain and sorrow of life. He asked himself if his own soul could be made pure and how he could render services to the miserable mankind. He tried to obtain divine revelation or inspiration by going through an incredible period of extreme asceticism but the effort was fruitless. He then gave it up and tried something else. Many other efforts of Gautama were fruitless. Finally, years and years later, Gautama found enlightenment under a Bo tree during a session of his meditation. Thus, Gautama became Gautama Buddha. The word *Buddha* means simply the *Enlightened One*.

Interestingly, Buddhism, in its original concept, acknowledges no god as a supreme being. It did not preach the existence

of a soul and promised no heaven or even life after death. Gautama Buddha offered simply a way to escape from the cycle of birth and death. What Buddhism taught in the ancient time was that (1) Suffering exists, (2) Craving for existence is the cause of suffering, (3) Craving for wealth, sensual excitement, and immorality can be overcome, and (4) the complete peace of mind and soul– *nirvana*– can be achieved through the Eightfold Path.

These teachings were known as the Four Noble Truths. The steps of the Eightfold Path needed to attain *nirvana* are: (1) the right views, (2) the right intentions, (3) the right speech, (4) the right action, (5) the right vocation, (6) the right effort, (7) the right thinking, and (8) the right concentration.

A few centuries after the death of Gautama Buddha, Buddhism was split into two main streams: The Mahayana doctrines and Theravada Buddhism. The Lao are followers of the latter. Many aspects of other philosophical schools were incorporated into the Mahayana doctrines, including the deification of Buddha himself. But the Theravada Buddhists maintain that the ideal Buddhist is a faithful devotee to the traditional Eightfold Path, so, they continue to revere the personality of Gautama Buddha and his original teachings.

As you can see, both Hinduism and Buddhism have contributed a great deal the making up of the Lao culture. But a Lao is a Lao and he will always reject the elements of any philosophy if they don't satisfy his pragmatic nature. Thus, the Lao have never accepted the caste system which is the inner citadel of Brahmanism. A Lao believes that he or she was born into a family, into a village, but not into a fatalistic caste. A Lao may live as long as he wishes to with his family but can leave his family and his village whenever the necessity arises. Even with Buddhism, although the concept of *nirvana* is accepted, the Lao will do his utmost to maximize his earthly pleasure out of his present life just relying upon the human rationality as a possible source of the immediate improvement of the present existence. However, at the same time, the Lao are oppressed by the *Phi*. Thus, sometimes the main object of their religious life is to devise adequate ways by which the *Phi* can be scared away or brought under control.

Chapter III

THE LAO CONCEPT OF A HUMAN BEING

What is a human being? A biologist will indicate that all life consists of living units called cells. Human beings are made of cells, millions and millions of cells. So are the plants and animals. The plants don't move about like animals because they have no organized movement within their cells.

According to the theory of evolution, human species are derived from primates. The primates have gone through many stages of life transformation, from the bush baby to man. Thus, changes to many parts of the body of the primates took place in this long process of evolution. Consequently, after many millions of years, the apes became the ape-men, and then the ape-men became human beings. The evolutionists have used cranial capacities to distinguish three sequential human species, namely: the handy man (*Homo Habilis*), the erect man (*Homo Erectus*), and the thinking man (*Homo Sapiens*).

When asked about the origin of man, a Christian is likely to give a totally different answer. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the believers have no doubt about the origin of mankind. A Christian, independent of nationality and church affiliation, is absolutely convinced that God created Heaven and Earth. All human beings descended from Adam and Eve who themselves are a creation of the omnipresent and mighty God. Thus, Adam and Eve became the progenitors of the human race. A Christian also knows that Adam was created out of God's divine love.

A traditional Lao is less fortunate than his Darwinist friends and his Judeo-Christian brothers and sisters. To a Lao, life will probably remain a great mystery forever although the birth of human life by itself may appear to him obvious enough. In fact, the origin of the world has never been a central question in the Lao mythology. Therefore, in traditional Lao tales there is nothing comparable to the well-known myths of creation around the world such as Japanese gods Izanagi and Izanami who created the island of Onokoro by stirring the Ocean, or the Egyptian god Atum who created the air and moisture and gave the soul, Ka, to Shu and Tefnut, or the Scandinavian giant Ymir, the first man who was born from the melting ice, etcetera.

The Lao legends differ from others as they do not presuppose that there was something uncreated in the beginning. Things are simply there and they are natural. To the Lao, it is obvious that events have causes although they cannot explain what the

causes are. According to a legend, Laotians were found, not created. Please listen to the *Khoun Borom* legend:

> *"One day, on a white elephant, Khoun Borom, and his two wives were sent from Heaven to Muong Theng (Dien Bien Phu) to make a living. Upon his arrival, Khoun Borom found two enormous gourds which he subsequently pierced with a burned iron stick. Suddenly, men, women and domestic animals walked out of the pierced holes. Seeds and working tools were also found in the gourds. This was how the area was populated. As time went by, Khoun Borom's two wives gave him seven children, all sons. Khoun Lo, the eldest, was subsequently given the privilege of governing over the lands of Muong Swa where the later Kingdom of A Million Elephants originated from..."*

The Khoun Borom legend does not explain the complexity of human nature nor where those people found in the giant gourds came from. But that is very typical of the Lao who seldom philosophize about matters beyond their comprehensive power. Brahmanism, which had a great influence on the Lao society in the earlier time, connotes the non-recognition of any monotheism. All forms of belief including magic and the cult of spirits have, therefore, developed without any official control of any kind. Consequently, a jungle of disorderly superstitions, demons and ghosts have played an important role in the popular belief of the Lao. Even today, the traditional Lao still believe that they coexist with spirits of all kinds, and that some malignant demons may influence their lives or take them away. It is said that many of these bad spirits are the ghosts of those who have died of a tragic and unusual death. Such beliefs are particularly strong among the Lao who live in remote villages where they are exposed to wild beasts or sudden death caused by tropical diseases.

After Brahmanism came Buddhism. Through the Buddhist theory of reincarnation the Lao learn about the transmigration of souls. The theory suggests a sense of direction into the future: *Nirvana*. But it gives no explanation as to how or where the very first, human being came into existence.

Most of the Lao are religious people in a larger sense of the word. It is extremely difficult to draw the line between the believers of Animism, Brahmanism, Buddhism and the worship of a local deity. Therefore, in trying to formulate the concept of a human being, a traditional Lao will rely on as many elements as he can possibly find and comprehend. From the Buddhist

reincarnation theory he will accept the explanation that his present life comes from the previous one and the conduct of his present human activities will affect his next life. The first conclusion then has to be that a human being is a reincarnation of oneself. From the Animistic and local deity, the Lao also learned that their life is invisibly associated with the coexistence of all kinds of spirits, generally called *Phi* (pronounced *pee*) in the Lao language. Moreover, some of the *Phi* are said to live within the human body. Thus, the Lao draw a second conclusion that a human being represents not only the highest level of animal species, but also may serve as a residential area to other supernatural beings. Finally, the Lao see themselves as quite capable of carrying out certain responsibilities by the decisions of their own. Therefore, they have also concluded that in spite of the *Phi*, human beings are quite independent and do not have to be always oppressed by the mercy of demons.

The complexity of the human being and the uncertainty about his origin must have fascinated Lao linguists since the beginning because they have chosen the term *Khon* to designate a human being. Interestingly enough, *Khon* means *to mix* in the Lao tongue. Thus, a human being is conceived as a kind of *mixture* or composite by nature. Perhaps this is why the giant gourds were necessary in the Khoun Borom legend.

Chapter IV

THE LAO PERCEPTION OF A HUMAN LIFE

There is a popular belief among the traditional Lao that a certain number of lives must evolve or be accomplished before anyone can reach the ultimate destination: *Nirvana*. It is also said that Prince Gautama himself had gone through five hundred different forms of life before he finally became a Buddha some two thousand five hundred years ago. Each life was of different length and differed from one another in nature, and those lives were not all associated with the human race.

The Buddhist teachings often use the previous lives of Buddha to illustrate the complexity of our human nature. The best known to date are the *ten lives*, carefully selected from the Buddha's previous incarnations. They are told in various ceremonies and festivities. They are called the *Jataka* tales. As a matter of fact, each tale of the Jataka is attempting to debate a major issue in human ethics. Generosity and its implication is the theme of *Vetsandon*, the last incarnation before Enlightenment was found when Prince Gautama became Buddha. This is what happened in the life of Vetsandon:

> *"Vetsandon became King of Pasexay, a city with walls of Sandalwood, when he was 16 years old. Being so young, he had not had time enough to learn many things from the late king, his father. He married a girl named Nang Mathee, and soon a son and daughter were born to them. They named the boy Kanha and the daughter Salee. Sometimes the family would go riding on the royal white elephant. All white elephants are sacred and bring good luck, of course, but this elephant, named Pachaya-nakhen, had been born on the same day as Vetsandon, and so was doubly lucky.*
>
> *Vetsandon enjoyed sharing his wealth with others, and the people liked him very much. Sometimes he would see very poor people and he would give away so much money that the royal treasury was almost empty. One of his advisers, named Lousaka, cautioned Vetsandon not to be so generous, but the young king would not listen. As long as there was money in the treasury, Vetsandon did not intend to have any poor or hungry people in his kingdom. All the people in Pasexay city had good houses to live in, plenty to eat, and were very happy. In a tributary city,*

Kalingka, people were not happy at all. They had little food and water, for the rains had failed their area one year. Every day was like the day before, a hot sun, and a sky either clear or with a few clouds that brought no rain. The governor of Kalingka called a meeting of the eight wise men. After much discussion it was decided that if they could get King Vetsandon's sacred white elephant, the rain would come. The governor then told them to go beg for the elephant from Vetsandon. In accordance with the request of the wise men from Kalingka, Vetsandon gave them the white elephant. The men from Kalingka went away rejoicing, leading Pachayanakhen. But the citizens of Pasexay City were very sad at seeing the departure of what was to them the symbol of their good fortune. When somewhat later, their king even gave away the royal carriage and horses, their sadness quickly turned to outrage. They expelled Vetsandon from the city. They felt he was too generous, and thus not qualified to be their king. Vetsandon, accompanied by Nang Mathee, Kanha and Salee, fled to the forest. There they met a hermit named Achoutta and a hunter named Chettabout who gave them food and helped them build a small palace in which to live. After awhile, they were just as happy in their little forest home as they had been in the great palace in the city. Seven months after the king had been expelled, the citizens of Pasexay City still had not decided on a new king. Lousaka tried to run things, but he did not like the job under the prevailing conditions. Many people in the city liked him even less than he liked the job. The dislike of him was because of his wife, Nang Amittata. Although Lousaka was old his wife was young, Nang Amittata was not only young, she was beautiful, and not only beautiful, but a very good person. All the men admired her. They cursed their wives because they were not the equal of Nang Amittata. The wives became angry at Nang Amittata and cursed her.

"Nang Amittata and Lousaka became so unhappy they knew something had to be done. They decided that Lousaka should go to the forest and beg Vetsandon to let his son and daughter come back to live with them in Pasexay. Maybe the children would bring them good luck. Lousaka went to the forest and wandered around the trails. After a while some fierce dogs ran him up a tree and he was almost shot by the dogs' owner, hunter Chettabout. After the hunter learned, however, that Lousaka

was a friend of Vetsandon's, he spared him, and the hermit, Achoutta, showed Lousaka the way to Vetsandon's forest home. When Lousaka arrived, Nang Mathee was gone, looking for fruits in the forest. She could not return for a long time because of tigers and other wild beasts that barred the way. Lousaka explained to Vetsandon how everyone in Pasexay was so miserable and asked for Kanha and Salee. Vetsandon agreed to give his children to Lousaka in order to help the people of his unhappy kingdom. When Nang Mathee managed to escape from the tigers and return home, Vetsandon explained that he had agreed to give their son and daughter to Lousaka. Nang Mathee fainted. When she regained consciousness, she begged her husband not to part with Kanha and Salee. When she recovered from the first shock, however, she realized her husband had given away their children because of his great soul. She respected him and was glad.

Lord Indra was looking down on all of this from his throne in the lofty thunderheads of the sky. He knew that if someone came to beg for Nang Mathee, Vetsandon would give her away, too. So Indra, or Prain as he is known in Laos, changed himself into an old man and went to see Vetsandon and asked for his wife, explaining that he had no one in the world to care for him. Vetsandon picked up Nang Mathee and gave her to the old man. Although the latter accepted Nang Mathee, he quickly changed himself back into Lord Indra and handed her back to her husband. He also restored the children to their parents. The god then told Vetsandon that he had no right to give away his wife, who loved only him, to anyone else, nor did he have the right to give away his children. Too much of a good thing, such as generosity, leads to grief, Lord Indra explained.

When Lousaka returned to Pasexay and told of his adventures in the forest with Vetsandon, the people remembered how happy they had been before they had expelled their king. They sent a delegation to the forest and invited Vetsandon to return with Nang Mathee and Kanha and Salee. Everyone in Pasexay was happy as long as Vetsandon ruled and there were no more poor or hungry people within the walls of Sandalwood."

The Vetsandon tale is very popular in Laos. So are all other legends dealing with the *Karma* theory of reincarnation. The Lao

believe that there is life everywhere. The complexity of the Lao universe was described in Chapter Two. Of course, there is life in all humans, animals, and insects. Each one of them is in the same process of evolving towards *Nirvana*. Moreover, the Lao believe that trees, mountains, or rivers are equally expressions of life in their universe. Therefore, it is extremely important for us to understand the Lao philosophy of life in which our human lives represent virtually a very, very small part of the life itself. This is why the lack of motivation in a Lao's daily activities may seem, sometimes, apparent. The person involved will tend to be passive in his community. This is possible because he thinks that his present life is merely an interlude between other lives which may be more interesting or more important. Sometimes, therefore, the doctrine of the transmigration of souls has been accused of embodying an extreme form of fatalism, which impedes human ambition. It may also lead the local leadership into an impasse under various circumstances. Most of the time, however, the *Karma* theory has been serving the Lao as an efficient factor of moderation in their daily life.

In trying to help you to understand the different expressions of life in the Lao universe, I would like to invite you to listen to the tale about the Mekong River, one of the largest rivers in the world. Many Lao still believe that the Mekong is inhabited by many dragons, and that the river has a life of its own:

> *"Lao people always say that the Mekong originated from Nong Kasae (the Kuva Lake) and that the water from the Mekong and from the Nan River (possibly the Yangtze Kiang River or the Menam River in Thailand) cannot mix in the same bottle, for the bottle will crack or even burst. The story behind that goes like this: Once upon a time there lived two dragon kings in Nong Kasae. One was called Souttoranark and the other was Souvanranark. Each was very powerful and had many thousands of followers. They became very good friends. Every year they visited and helped one another in many ways, often exchanging gifts. One day, King Soutto and his men went into a forest to hunt. He was lucky to find big game, an elephant. In spite of its thin hair, the elephant is one of the largest animals. King Soutto gave a big share of the meat to his friend. When Souvanranark received the gift, he was delighted and sent back a message to thank his friend. One day in the third month, King Souvanranark and his soldiers went out to hunt along the lake. He was making a determined effort to find big game such as deer, rhinoc-*

eros, elephants or buffaloes, but they did not have any luck. He could not find anything. Finally he managed to get a porcupine. He and his people returned to the palace and began to skin and cut up the animal. Then the king divided the meat into equal parts. Souvan had his men take Soutto's share to him. Seeing that skin and the spines of the animal were beautiful, the King sent some of them along, too.

When King Soutto looked at the amount of meat in comparison with the spines, he thought that his friend was unfair. "How could he possibly do that to me?" he thought. "Only this much meat from the biggest animal in the world?" "I can't believe it," he said. He refused to accept the gift and told his friend's soldiers to return the gift. He also told them to ask their king to come to see him personally. But before leaving, King Souvan's soldiers pled, "Your Majesty, this is the meat of a porcupine. Although its spines are much larger than elephant hair, its body itself is much smaller than an elephant. That is why we could bring only this much meat." King Soutto was still very angry and would not listen. Upon their arrival at King Souvan's palace, the men went straight to report the incident. "Your Majesty," they said, "your gift that we delivered has been refused. King Soutto also told us to ask you to come to see him tomorrow." King Souvanranark, after hearing that, said, "What has become of my dear friend? I'm going to find out myself tomorrow." In any case, I don't think he is going to give up. I don't think he will listen to my explanation. And I don't think he knows what a porcupine is. He just looked at its spines and thought it was an animal bigger than an elephant. Why doesn't he see that what I gave was a sincere gift? Even though it was just a small amount, it was an equal share. I didn't take advantage of him. "Why did he return it to me with anger instead of thanks?"

At dawn the following morning, King Soutto assembled all his men in the meeting hall thinking his friend would come. When all his men reported to him, Soutto spoke to them with a firm voice, "We would be prepared because our friend Souvan has betrayed us. He did not follow our agreement. He will come to settle the problem with me by himself. All of you know that a porcupine is a larger animal than an elephant because its spines are so big and sharp. It must be the largest animal in the world." After his ministers heard that, they thought they should explain to

the king which animal was larger, but they were afraid of being executed. Instead, they kept quiet and said, "We are ready to listen to your order, your Majesty." At that moment, Souvan and his people appeared. Even though King Soutto was still angry he gave his friend a warm welcome. But he thought he would not excuse Souvan if he did not admit that he was guilty. As soon as the meeting opened, Soutto began speaking, "Dear friend, Souvan, I thought we were really sincere friends and both would follow our agreement seriously. I don't see how you could betray me." Souvan denied his friend's accusation of being dishonest. He said that he loved and trusted his friend. He could swear for his faithfulness. These statements made Soutto even more furious and he said he could not listen. He invited comments from the audience. He asked, "Which of us is selfish or inconsiderate?" When I got an elephant, a smaller animal than a porcupine, I gave my friend an equal share while he gave me only a small amount of the porcupine meat. "That was not fair." When Soutto finished talking, his soldiers clapped and laughed at King Souvan. When the noise faded away, Souvan explained again, "Please listen again, my dear friend. I do not think you have ever seen a porcupine. You cannot judge the size of an animal by the size of its spines or hair. An elephant is a big animal but its hair is very thin. Even its eyes are small. The eyes of other animals, such as buffaloes, cows, and horses are larger than an elephant's, but their bodies are smaller. Of course, a porcupine's spine is larger then the hair of an elephant, but its body is not much larger then some kinds of birds. Please do not misunderstand. Do not break our friendship. Please think that I am always your good friend and I also think that you are always my best friend."

No matter what and how much Souvan tried to explain, Soutto insisted that what his friend said was not true. He rose from his chair and walked away. Souvan left without knowing what was going to happen next. A few days later, Soutto sent a message to Souvan saying that if Souvan was still stubborn he should prepare for an attack. After reading the message, Souvan realized that he had no choice. He immediately sounded the gong to assemble his men. When they gathered they discussed how ignorant and inconsiderate Soutto was. Seven days after the message reached Souvan, Soutto moved his force to Souvan's territory. All the dragons came with magic

power. They moved so fast that they churned the water until it was muddy. Suddenly, Souvan ordered his soldiers to confront them, causing a big turmoil. All the Kuva area became cloudy and hazy. The sun could not be seen for seven days. All the animals, big and small, were afraid. The birds flew away. The war went on and on, for the two sides were equally strong. The water became muddier. More and more living beings were dying, and chaos forced some of the gods living in the heavens to move away. The king of gods sympathized with the small animals, so he cast a spell with his supernatural power to threaten two friends. Finally, they stopped fighting.

The god ordered them to build to rivers to compensate for their deeds. Soutto was responsible for making the Mekong from the lake to the sea, while Souvan was put in charge of building the Nan River. The god finally convinced Soutto of the size of a porcupine and make him understand Souvan.

Ever after they were good friends again. But the waters of the two rivers have not yet forgotten the hatred that led to their creation."

Note: The story related to the creation of the Mekong River was known to the Lao before Buddhism was introduced to them. Therefore, there was no reference to it in the tale. Both of the reproduced stories in this Chapter are excerpts from Legends of the Lao, a compilation by Xay Kaignavongsa and Hugh Fincher.

Chapter V

THE LAO LIFE CIRCLE

At the present time, most of the Lao people still regard their present life as an interlude. To them, this life is a life among many other possibilities of lives or rather between other forms of life. Being Theravada Buddhists, the Lao in general, rightly or wrongly, believe in the theory of reincarnation. In the Buddhist philosophy, believers of the transmigration of souls, perceive their human lifetime as an instrumentally critical passage towards their ultimate destination: Nirvana. Thus, the whole lifetime of an individual is being viewed most frequently as a "circle". The Lao further believe that there are many possible "circles" in the nature of our human life. According to the same theory, a single circle of life under human form may actually have a quantity of those "circles". For instance, the popular Lao belief has always maintained that a person may be born to become a prosperous merchant, a powerful leader, or a king in one lifetime, while in another lifetime the same individual reincarnated from the same soul could become a being who was not well known.

The concept of our human lifetime as an interlude, and the generally admitted perception of the present lifetime as an instrumental passage are extremely important in understanding the reasoning process behind the Lao philosophy of life circle. There are several ways to determine the life circle itself. One way is to view the circle in relation to the obvious question of life and death. In this case, there are four elements in such a circle: the birth, the aging process, sickness, and death. The birth or the act of rebirth is conditioned by the craving for existence, the craving for wealth, etcetera. Once a person is born, there is no way to stop the aging process, sickness, and death. Therefore, goes the theory, if the craving process could be somehow stopped, the birth or the act of rebirth won't be necessary any more (See Chapter Two).

Another way of looking at the life circle is to focus on the methodological aspects of the circle itself. Precisely, for our educational purposes, I would like to invite you to have a look at the Lao childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and parenthood. In a sense, the whole lifetime of a traditional Lao is dedicated to "education". Education is instrumentally critical in reaching maturity in a lifetime. Like in many other cultures, before reaching the developmental stage of the necessary maturity in

life, the Lao have to go through several "gates" by following a series of sets of steps.

To understand the rationale of the Lao life circle and to be able to escape from the act of rebirth itself, the Lao believers of the transmigration of souls will tend to possibly improve all aspects of the present life. To improve means to master the matters of concern. Therefore, the whole lifetime can also be presented as an uninterrupted educational process. Let's start with the "child".

THE LAO CHILD

The reincarnation theory is very popular among the Lao people. To make sure that the Lao themselves understand and accept the present lifetime as an instrumental passage towards Nirvana, the reincarnation theory will maintain that a child actually is not a child. Moreover, the Lao child is not simply a "product" of the father and the mother. In this philosophy, the father and the mother are rather instrumental to act of rebirth. Their child should, therefore, be seen as a reincarnation of an independent soul. However, there is a strong interrelationship between the "child" and the persons who will become the "chosen" father and mother. The relationship itself is an accumulation of many lifetimes' interactions between the concerned parties. The implications of such a theory, when accepted, will always be far-reaching for its believers. Thus, the first significant event in the life of a Lao is the naming ceremony (See the next Chapter). Traditionally, the proper "childhood" of a Lao, will last up to the age of fourteen during which time the child will be given the privilege to observe. Observation is probably a key word in the Lao traditional system of education. Situations to be observed are not elaborated to serve the purpose of the child's educational needs per se. However, activities surrounding the child are closely related to the daily life of the community. The scope of the child's interest is limited to the child's own family affairs. Upon reaching the age of ten, the Lao child will have more occasions to observe the social forms of life between his own family and other members of the same community. This is the time to teach the child about the Lao kinship system.

THE LAO ADOLESCENT

The adolescent, in the traditional Lao understanding, includes people from 15 to 29 years of age. During the first 14

years, the Lao child learns about life mainly through observations. They might have been participating in many activities, but their participation was not critical to the rationality of the learning process. It is in the following fifteen years that the young Lao will be facing all kinds of occasions where his skills of observation will be "tested". The adolescent will now learn about life through active participation in working with all the members of his own community and outside his own community. This is the time to travel and to learn about the surrounding environment. The Lao adolescent begins to see and is able to compare different patterns of the social and economic situations in a relatively larger community than his own. Many will choose their mates and get married in this period of life, but marriage by itself does not imply, in the Lao tradition of thinking, that the couple is independent. Independence is associated with "adulthood" which is the next logical step in the mental and intellectual development of the Lao.

THE LAO ADULT

To be an "adult", in the Lao understanding, is to be totally independent, independent in terms of self-sufficiency and in terms of quality in self-reliance. Therefore, the adulthood of a Lao is closely identified with his world of work. The number of actions undertaken during the next twenty years or so will indicate the range of experiences of the "adult" person. The ways and circumstances under which those activities have been conducted or accomplished will tell about the ability or the nature of the adult person involved. Usually the Lao adults are found between 30 and 49 years of age. However many people in this age group may very well remain totally dependent and, therefore, may never become adults in their lifetimes.

THE LAO PARENT

A "wise" person is a mature person. Maturity, in this context, means as well balanced judgement on important issues of life with the capability of seeing implications involved in the decision making process. A wise person is sometimes called a *parent*. In the Lao culture, the term *parent* is not always a synonym for *father* or *mother*. In fact, in the term *parent* there is more than being a father or mother. Actually, only successful fathers and mothers can become parents. In this case, success means the smooth passage from childhood to adulthood as a result of a systematic involvement on the part of the father and

mother for their children. In this sense, anybody can become a parent, provided that the person involved has successfully helped another person in becoming an "adult".

Chapter VI

IMPORTANT LAO CEREMONIES

Celebrations and ceremonies seem to never end in a typical Lao family. All of them, whether religious or not, are closely related to all phases of the Lao life circle described in Chapter Five. Buddhism offers a way of life to the Lao but prescribes them no rules as to how to celebrate important moments for a human being in their lifetime. Therefore, the Lao are mixing the various rites from Brahmanism with elements of the widely dominating popular belief in the cult of the spirits, the famous *phi*.

The *su-kwan* ceremony, or *bact* in a more formal language, is the core of every popular celebration. *Su* means *to invite* and *kwan* the *Soul*. This is how a *su-kwan* ceremony is held in its simple form. After a tower made from the banana leaves and decorated with hundreds of flowers has been prepared, it will be put on a mat just in the middle of the living room. Usually, the tower stands on a silver tray and is supported by a traditional bamboo table which is round and low. There is a candle on the top of the tower. Hundreds of white yarns symbolizing the traditional sacred thread are placed around the tower, between the flowers, and through the small bamboo sticks. The host and guests will be sitting on the floor forming a circle around the table. Between the table and the sitting people, there is food, mostly a chicken cooked with its head and feet, a few boiled eggs, candies and cakes, and a bottle of rice wine with a small glass.

When the time comes to start the ceremony, the host will ask the most senior member of the community to lead the celebration. After accepting the mission, the senior person will join his two hands and press them against his chest. His gesture is immediately followed by all the rest of the people surrounding the tower. He then will begin to chant a few magical formulas which may last from a few minutes to one whole hour depending on occasions. The man is actually inviting the mobile souls to return to their residences. According to the popular belief, there are thirty-two of such mobile souls presiding over the human body. Each soul has its own residence, thus, there are thirty-two residential organs. The King soul is believed to "live" in our head (this is the main reason why some Southeast Asians do not wish their head to be touched or even pointed at by another person). Anyway, after each spelled formula, a yarn will be taken off the bamboo stick and placed around the wrist of a chosen person. The yarn will end with a tied knot to symbolize an effective return

of the absent soul. According to tradition, the person who receives such a yarn or yarns should keep them on for at least three consecutive days.

Su-kwan is so popular in Laos that there is a special *su-kwan* for almost each imaginable occasion. But mostly, a *su-kwan* or a *baci* is held for the following reasons: the birth of a child, the child's entry to the Buddhist priesthood, the wedding, the death of a person, a recovery from a serious sickness, the departure for a long trip, a return home from a long journey abroad, a welcoming gesture for honorable guests, a reunion with good friends, etcetera.

Su-kwan is also the most social event in Lao cultural life. In a country where people do not shake hands to say "Hello" and where boys and girls do not embrace each other in public, the *su-kwan* ceremony presents an excellent occasion to express feelings of concern, friendship, and respect. The person receiving the yarn is supposed to extend one hand towards the blessing wisher, while the other hand must be kept with straight fingers at the level of one's face. There are two positions for the extended hand. First it remains empty and must have the palm turning towards the ground. This is the time when the wisher commands the "bad elements" inside the body to get out, and then the palm is turned back to face the sky. This is the moment when friends and relatives will put food, fruits, and an egg in the hand while wishing the person all the best. Finally, it is the wishtaker's turn to become the wisher and the same patterns will be repeated over and over again.

Chapter VII

MAJOR LAO HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

In Vientiane and some other larger Laotian towns, you will have the impression that the Lao are never on time. This is particularly obvious when there are many *boon* going around. The notorious casualness about time and appointments of the Lao towners are closely related to the *boon*, a common name for all imaginable occasions of feasting, gaiety and enjoyment. Most of the *boons* last all night with a diversity of entertainments. In Laos, all family ceremonies, seasonal festivities, welcoming parties for dignified personalities and close friends, and, of course, all the religious rites are *boons*. *Boon* simply means *merit* or *good deeds* in the Lao tongue, therefore, the Lao love to organize the *boon*. Most sincerely, the Lao will always regret that the twenty-four-hour day is too short and that all the days of the year are not enough to celebrate all the *boons*.

All the foreigners who have stayed long enough in the former Kingdom of Laos could easily have learned that the Lao are simple and practical people. Most of the Lao have only two foremost concerns on earth: how to comply with the necessity of acquiring some kind of religious merit and how to enjoy the pleasures of life in the immediate present. The Lao even know how to compromise with Gautama Buddha. For instance, in the Four Noble Truths, Buddha taught his followers about the cause of human suffering. Buddhist teachings recommend that one should avoid sensual excitements if Nirvana is to be achieved. The Lao have their own interpretation of Buddhism in this regard and they seem to be totally comfortable with the extraordinary joyful celebration of the endless *boons*. From the Lao point of view, this combination of pleasure in life and religious merit-making seem to be eminently logical. In fact, the Lao consider the pleasure in life not as a handicap but rather as an evidence of success in the process to eradicate suffering. The Lao believe in the transmigration of souls. They are also convinced that their present life is just another interlude. However, the idea to kill suffering by having pleasure is typically Lao. It is so dominant in the Lao Buddhist minds that even in their frequent prayers they hope their next life will be a more enjoyable one. *Muan* is *having pleasure* in Lao and *muan* is a key word in understanding the Lao mentality. *Muan* is highly visible in all celebration of all *boons*. In Laos, religion and enjoyment are mixed and always come as a pair.

The basic elements for setting the celebration time of all the boons are the Lao calendar and astrology. The Western calendar is little understood by the Lao who live outside the capital and provincial cities. The ordinary Lao year has twelve months of thirty and twenty-nine days alternately. Each month is divided into periods of the waxing and waning moon. Of course all periods are good for the *boon* celebrations, provided good reasons are given. Reasons for a good *boon* are plentiful in the Lao universe!

Here are some major holidays and festivals, nationally celebrated in Laos:

Boon Pee Mai (The New Year Celebration)

In a regular year, the Lao months are numbered from one to twelve. The first month begins somewhere between November and December of the Western calendar. However, the Lao will not celebrate their New Year until a later date, in April, for astrological reasons. Astrology plays a monumental role in the Lao culture. The astrological signs of the fifth lunar month (April) seem to point to light and prosperity. The exact time for the Lao New Year celebration varies from year to year, though it must be held between the sixth day of the waning moon of the fifth month and the sixth day of the waxing moon of the sixth month. Therefore, the Lao New Year is being celebrated always in mid-April.

The *Boon Pee Mai* or the *Boon of the Fifth Month*, as the Lao prefer to call it, is a great feasting time, lasting from three to seven days. The last day of the old year is when the Lao houses are systematically swept to put things in order but also to symbolize the expulsion of the bad and marauding *phi* (spirits) hiding in the same residence. On the first day of the New Year, the entire Lao population will go to the pagoda in the morning, bringing with them perfumed holy water to cleanse the many existing statues of Gautama Buddha. In their prayers, the Lao will ask for good health and a better welfare for their families in the incoming year. The first day is also the time to pay visits to family members who do not live in the same house, to friends, and to all the respected figures in the region. The next day is a day of enjoyment. Boys and girls and people of all ages, by hundreds and by thousands, will go down the streets pouring water on each other, singing, and dancing all day long. In the royal city of Luangprabang, special celebrations are held to release birds and other animals throughout New Year's day. To conclude the festivity of *Boon Pee Mai* the Lao will build many small stupas along the river banks

and then in the courts of the pagodas. Once again they will pray for a good year and for a long life with as many enjoyable moments as the number of grains of sand which were used to erect the stupa itself.

Boon Bang Fai (The Rocket festival)

This is the *boon* of the sixth lunar month, a very important *boon* to the Lao farmers who depend on the rain for watering their ricefields. There are dances, processions and puppet shows in the streets, but the main focus is on the firing of bamboo rockets. The Lao took this tradition from Brahmanism which started the ritual firing of rockets to provoke the rain. Today, every Lao knows that the heavy rain will come after the month of May, whether the rockets were fired or not. Nevertheless, *Boon Bang Fai* will go on because it gives an occasion for enjoyment to the farmers who need some kind of relaxation before the long months of hard work during the incoming rainy season. The Rocket Festival is probably the most jubilant celebration of all Lao festivities.

The sixth lunar month, at the full moon of May, is also a time for the Lao to commemorate the birth, enlightenment, and death of Gautama Buddha, although it has nothing to do with the previously mentioned rocket festival.

Boon Xuang Hua (The Boat Racing Festival)

This *boon* occurs at the end of the rainy season between October and November. It marks the return of farmers to their social life. The street are full again of singers and dancers. The tradition of boat racing is connected with the legend about a dishonest king who had tried to take a beautiful woman from her husband through many tricky and unfair competitions. The last game between the king and the desperate man was the boat racing. Fortunately, many dragons came to assist the poor husband in the critical moment. The dragon king, *Naga*, disguised himself as a boat for the oppressed husband. Consequently, the king's boat sank and the king with many of his rowers were drowned. Thus, the story of boat racing is a story of the victory of the simple and humble people over their oppressive masters.

In the early days, it was the tradition to have the race between the king's boat and the people's boat. If the king's boat won in any year, the Lao would immediately think that the people would have problems and hardship in the coming year. But if the

people's boat should win, the traditional Lao would believe that the people would have a peaceful year with good health and prosperity for all. Nowadays, there are more than two boats in the race and the result of the boat racing does not affect the people's destiny anymore.

Boon That Luang (The *That Luang* Festival).

In 1566, a great stupa was erected in the administrative capital city of Vientiane. It was built to cover another smaller stupa erected earlier in the 14th century. It is believed that the Great Stupa in Vientiane contains a relic of Gautama Buddha. *Boon That Luang* occurs every year at the full moon of the twelfth lunar month. It coincides with the end of harvest time. The main attraction of the festival is the international fair where the outside world makes many impressions on the Lao. All Laotian provinces are represented. The magnitude of Laotian ethnicity is always highly visible in such an occasion. The *That Luang* festival is also an opportunity to see the King and the Queen of Laos walking only a few meters away. Since the fall of the country in 1975, this no longer happens although the Great Stupa still stands.

Chapter VIII

THE LAO FAMILY STRUCTURE

To the best of my knowledge, a systematic study of the Lao family has not been launched yet. Until the present day, interest in the Lao family had been expressed only by means of moralistic proverbs, folklore, and a few articles of law. Undoubtedly, the Lao family-kin units, like many others, are facing both directions, toward the society and toward the individual. Unfortunately, not much is known about the societal frameworks of a Lao family, and even much less is known about the individuals in the Lao family itself. Nevertheless, we shall try to reflect some of the personal and societal values which may have contributed to the formation of a particular form of the Lao family.

In the Lao society, girls and boys play together, grow together, and work together. They will meet each other in the ricefields during the rainy season, in the forest while collecting the mushrooms and the firewood, or in the river while fishing and bathing. Of course, they will meet one another at the village pagoda and at all the boons (festivities) in their village and anywhere not too faraway. The young Lao are allowed considerable freedom to talk about love between members of the opposite sex, although in public, a young Lao male and female will not touch one another or openly suggest there are any intimate links between the two of them. The opportunity for courtship is considerable in the Lao society. Premarital sexual relationships, while not encouraged, are tolerated when they happen occasionally and especially when the young people are discreet about it themselves. The flexibility in the attitude of the Lao parents on this matter is closely related to the strong popular belief that karma exists and that the young people involved may have been lovers before in their previous life. In general, young people in the Lao country are relatively free to choose their own mates. Consequently, a young male and a young female will decide to get married by themselves. The Lao marriage arrangement exists. It is complicated and time consuming. However, the arrangement is purely ceremonial and absolutely secondary to the decision made by the young people of their own will.

After the marriage, the female may keep her maiden name or take her husband's. The young couple will not move into a separate dwelling right away. According to the traditional Lao custom, the future residence of the young couple is a part of the final marriage arrangement. As a rule, the groom will have spend

two to three years in the bride's parental household where the young married man will assume the hard work of the ricefield and share his father-in-law's many other responsibilities. If the bride is the youngest daughter of the family, the groom may never leave the property of his parents-in-law because the youngest daughter, or son, will normally remain in the parental household and will inherit the house site upon the death of the parents.

This type of temporary resettlement at the bride's parental household serves many social and educational purposes for the future heads of the Lao families. The groom will learn the art of living in harmony with people not belonging to his own family of orientation. He will also learn to appreciate the quality of life and hardship of other people. At the same time, this two to three year period of togetherness is long enough for the bride's parents to crystallize their own opinions about their son-in-law. Therefore, in the time of necessity, the parental advice to their own daughter will be invaluable as to how the young married woman, once away from home, can help to improve her own relationship with her parents-in-law. This period is also the time for the young couple to expect the coming of their own offspring. In this way, most of the first Lao children were born in their maternal grandparents' households. This custom is extremely helpful to the young mother because she can feel absolutely "at home", thus avoiding all kinds of psychological and emotional embarrassments. This is also an excellent time for the groom to learn how to express his true love for his wife through the due respect shown towards her parents. This is when the Lao grooms come to respect their parents-in-law and this "learned" respect will be tremendously helpful in cementing in kinship between the two families-in-law. It is also in this period that a married Lao starts to develop the idea of himself or herself as belonging to three different nuclear families. First of all he belongs to his own family of orientation in which he was born and reared, including his parents, brothers and sisters. Secondly, thanks to the bride's parents' attitude, the young married Lao man will feel a sense of belonging to the parents-in-law's family. Thirdly, he belongs to his own family of procreation that he now establishes by marriage which includes his wife and children. This beautiful tradition is also helpful to the Lao families in an economic sense because it is extremely necessary to those parents who have only daughters. If all daughters should accompany their spouse immediately after the marriage, it could create a sudden labor deficiency on the farm which might be critical to the existence of the bride's family of orientation itself.

The Lao society has been a feudal society for centuries. The Lao aristocracy was once dominated by the polygamy principle. Wives were then considered as economic and status assets. In the modern time, polygamy had not been encouraged among the Lao, but neither was it forbidden by the Lao law. Therefore, in principle, it has been possible for a Lao man to take a second wife or as many as he could afford. In terms of the household, however, a second wife and all consecutive ones are always subordinate to the first wife because there is no legal status for the second wife and the rest. Within the Lao law, no distinction is made between children from the different wives. Anyway, most of the Lao have come to understand that additional wives may only cause additional problems and no longer validate their superior status in the present society. Some Lao may not agree with this logic, but are simply too poor to afford more than one wife.

The Lao family is a patrilineally extended family. The composition of the Lao household is variable. The descent is traced through the male line. All children will carry the family name after their father's but the Lao patrilineal descent does not mean that a Lao is related only to his or her father's male kin. The kinship is very much alive in the Lao mind. Upon reaching adulthood and marrying, the Lao do not terminate their close relationship with their families of orientation. Moreover, the sisters and brothers who have married and left home are still considered members of the family of orientation. Therefore, it happens quite naturally in some regions of Laos that a whole village or even a group of villages is composed almost entirely of kin, derived from both the maternal and paternal parenthood.

The Lao family also plays a very important role in the socialization process of the young Lao. Most naturally, individuals who live in such extended family units have to learn the art of compromise. The guiding thought in the Lao family is to be consistent with the kin's demands and expectations. It is imperative, therefore, to learn what to do and what not to do within the family units. The learning process has to be very slow because the Lao adults tend to avoid giving any overt guidance. Somehow the Lao children are expected to gain wisdom by just being associated with life on earth and through their skills of observation. The Lao kinship system functions on affective ties and a certain amount of obligation. The network consists of people having various personalities and behaving in various ways. A personal achievement is very important to the family in terms of pride and honor. The concern for keeping the kinship intact is considerable in the Lao families which remain the Lao

society's prime economic and socializing units. Among the kin-based Lao, there are terms that distinguish between seven generations. However, the Lao society is far from being dominated by family and kinship organization.

After having experienced life with the bride's parents, most of the Lao couples will go and live near the groom's parents. In the new household, labor is divided along the lines of sex and age. Most of the heavy work will go to the male members, but all the domestic tasks would be assumed by women who have considerable say in all matters.

Chapter IX

THE LAO AND THEIR LIVING CONDITIONS

The economy of the kingdom of Laos is based on primitive agriculture with natural economy prevailing. Laos is undoubtedly the most backward country in Southeast Asia in regards to economic development. Laotian agriculture belongs to the less developed systems of rural husbandry. Whereas the Laotian peasant harvests but one crop a year, the Thais and the Burmese, as well as the population of Vietnam, have for a long time, gathered two or even three crops of paddy in a year.

A great majority of Lao have occupations consisting of rural activities. Seventy-five percent of the active Lao population, ranging from fifteen to fifty five years of age, are farmers. However, the rural economy which plays such an important role in determining, the living conditions of the Lao has continuously been neglected and is among the least known branches of economy to which little research effort has been dedicated. Neither the Laotian government nor any other important public or private body has ever worried about the development of agriculture. The lack of dispensable funds, insufficient state administration, the complex social system alongside the absence of any appropriate plan for the general development of the economy as a whole, are further causes of such conditions and explain why the barter or commercial exchanges seldom go beyond the limits of a purely local concern.

An analysis of one example of the Lao family budget should give you a fair idea of the situation which most of the Lao exist. The data quoted below were obtained as a result of an inquiry conducted under very difficult conditions. They are not totally representative but seem to offer some useful information for the understanding of Lao peasant holdings.

Our typical Lao family consists of seven members: father, mother, four children, and one relative. The family lives in a rectangular house raised off the ground on piles. The village, typically, is located just above flood level on one of many rivers or tributaries.

1. *Rice*: The average surface of the Lao family ricefields equals 6 acres; the average yield from 1 acre amounts to 759 pounds of paddy, i.e. 759 X 6.0 = 4,554 pounds of paddy or 2,728 pounds of rice. Roughly speaking, the yield is 220 pounds of rice per month. The price (1965: 1 U.S. dollar = 500 kips) is 6 cents

per pound of rice, i.e. 2,200 X 0.06 = $158.40. The above production is sufficient to cover the family's own needs and quite adequate at that.

2. *Other farm plants:* A Lao family also has a garden where cucumbers, bananas, corn, papaya, sugar cane, tobacco, ground nuts, and manioc are planted. This type of garden is called *suan*. The average *suan* has an average surface equal to 1,900 square yards. Cucumbers take three months from seed to harvest and can bring $30. Three other crops may bring to the family another income $42. The entire havested crop is sold.

3. *Gathering of berries, etc.* The gathering of berries is practiced chiefly by women and children. The entire crop is consumed by the family; it may represent a worth of $24.

4. *Pigs:* An average of 1.26 heads per family. Piglets are sold, for slaughter or for breeding at a price of $4 to $12 depending on their size. The total value of the marketed pigs is estimated at $40.

5. *Water buffaloes:* They average 1.94 heads per family, they serve as draught animals.

6. *Cows:* On the average there are 0.86 of them per Lao peasant family. They are used for draught animals. There are no milk cows in Laos.

7. *Poultry:* On the average there are 3.95 hens and 1.26 ducks per family, value amounts to $12.

8. *Fishery:* There are fish in ponds and rice fields owned by the family. The nearby river also provides our Lao family with fish. The annual consumption per family amounts to $24; occasional sales make $12.

In summing up consumption income, we have the total sale value of $160 while the family consumption is at $228. How about the family's expenses? On the average a family of seven needs 1 kilogram of salt per month (5 cents a kg.). They need also about 60 liters of paraffin oil per year totaling at $3.18. About $12 will be spent on sugar and milk (concentrated). The working-wear, shirts, and trousers for the two men will cost $24 (for the father and relative); the mother will need 6 skirts or *xin*. They are $1 a piece. The four children will need $12. Every two years

the Lao family would also spend a total amount of $78 for their holiday attire. Another $24 will be spent for health care and like expenses. The family is likely to take part at the three *boons* (festivities) per annum and on each occasion they will spend about $6. Nails, strings and small repairs, etc., will cost the family $24. Therefore, after the overall transaction balance, the family may have saved no more than $15 per year. It is also useless to mention that there is no running water in the Lao houses and electricity is totally unknown to the majority of the peasants.

Chapter X

WISDOM VERSUS KNOWLEDGE

Laos became a French colony in 1893. It took the French almost a decade to come up with the idea of setting a secular education for the Laotians. The first school was built in 1902. It was a school for adult education, established mainly because of the colonial administration's increasing need for secretaries, interpreters,and minor functionaries. A second school was opened in 1905. This time, the elementary grades for children were included as well.

In 1917, by a French decree, the few schools that existed in Laos were made part of the Indochinese education system. Thus, there was a single and common educational system for schools in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, despite the great differences of many orders between the peoples of the three Indochinese countries. According to that decree, each Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian commune was to have one official primary school. The primary cycle included five grades. In 1938, the system was modified and subdivided into an "Elementary primary cycle" covering grades 1, 2, and 3, and a "Complementary primary cycle" for grade 4, 5, and 6.

Laos has been a country of 10,000 villages. In 1945, for instance, there were only 175 elementary schools in the whole kingdom. The first teachers were all French but little by little most of them were replaced by French-speaking Vietnamese personnel whom the French colonial administration had brought into Laos. I believe this was the first time that corporal punishment as a disciplinary method was introduced to the school system in Laos. Despite these innovations, the Lao parents have not understood the role of a secular school. To the majority of them, the Buddhist monks represent the highest human values, and by extension, they regard the Buddhist teachings as superior to the education from a secular school. Consequently, the misinterpretation of Westernized education by the Lao and the special nature of the common Indochinese educational system have proven to be very detrimental to Lao society. One example: in 1945, only a few chief provincial towns had schools. Within one school in Vientiane there were 1,150 Vietnamese students and only 850 Lao! Laos, because of this factor alone, for several decades would be deprived of qualified personnel in most of the sectors affecting the economic and cultural life of the whole country.

Although secular education had been compulsory since 1951, the Lao students were rather poorly prepared in academic terms. This was partly due to the scarcity of trained Lao teachers. Laos gained its independence from French in 1953, but in principle, up to 1975, the education system in Laos has been following the French pattern. There are three years of schooling in each of the two primary cycles: the elementary and the complementary. Junior high schooling is provided in a *collège* and a *lycée*. But only the *lycée* can give a complete secondary education. In all, it takes 13 years of schooling in Laos, excluding kindergarten, to be prepared for entering a higher education in a college or university.

It is useless to point out that both secondary and higher education are very limited in Laos. Only a few manage to graduate from the *lycée* every year. The happy graduates usually go directly to higher studies in Vietnam, Cambodia, or France. After 1960, the Laotian government also sent high school graduates to a few other countries.

Up to 1975, the subjects taught in Laotian primary schools were: ethics and civics, history, geography, arithmetic, drawing, manual work, singing, and physical education. Lao has become the language of instruction in primary schools. French is part of the curriculum, after entering grade 4. The curriculum in the high schools include: French, ethics and civics, history, geography, mathematics, music, drawing, manual work, physical education, and Lao. All lessons are given in French. On the contrary, Lao as a language is being taught only 2 hours a week.

It is not difficult to observe that the submission of the Lao to formal Buddhist doctrine is sometimes purely perfunctory. The ancient *phi* doctrine of thirty-two souls presiding over the thirty-two human organs is still very popular in the Lao families, because in reality the cult of spirits has completely succeeded in assimilating itself to the Lao Buddhism (See Chapter Two and Six). For centuries now, the Lao have come to believe that to succeed in any enterprise it is absolutely necessary to have the favor of the spirits. Consequently, in the day-to-day life, the Lao Buddhists will attach much importance to the acquisition of merit through the sponsorship of religious ceremonies and direct contributions in support of the Wat and its monks.

Naturally, the average layman respects the moral code and attempts to follow the basic rules of Buddhism. However, most Lao Buddhists have totally failed to understand the dialectics of the Eightfold Path in which the whole program of the enlisted eight items is governed by the Right Views, i.e. knowledge. In general, people are asking simple questions so to obtain simple

answers. All Lao Buddhists consider wisdom more important or perhaps more necessary than knowledge, because it was explained to them that only wisdom will ultimately lead them towards *Nirvana*. Wisdom, people presume, is answering to the question of what is right and for whom, knowledge only responds to the question of what is possible and how. There is some justification for that because Enlightenment has always been the aim of Buddhist Teachings. Enlightenment should lead to Wisdom which in turn will pave the way to Deliverance from Suffering. Since so little was known to the Lao about secular education they also presume, wrongly, that knowledge could be obtained from the *school* while wisdom is possible only by going to the *wat* and supporting its monks.

Of course, there are fundamental differences between a secular school and a *Wat*, the Buddhist temple. Philosophically speaking, the school is aiming at success through education; the *wat* however, is guiding towards enlightenment through teachings. Another difference: while the brain and other physical conditions are essential in a school system, the mind is definitely more important and remains the focus of all Buddhist Teachings. Thus, the expression of a language is as important if not more than the language itself. There are also some significant differences in the methodology of teaching as well. In a school, different subjects are taught, the teacher plays an active role, and the students are learning through exercises; whereas in a *Wat* there are no students and no teachers. He who understands the true value and the logics of the paths and has successfully practiced the art of meditation is called a master. The one who is observing the Master so as to shape his own mind is called a disciple. The time, clockwise, which is so vital in any secular school, in terms of the student's graduation, has practically no meaning for a disciple's effort on the road to wisdom.

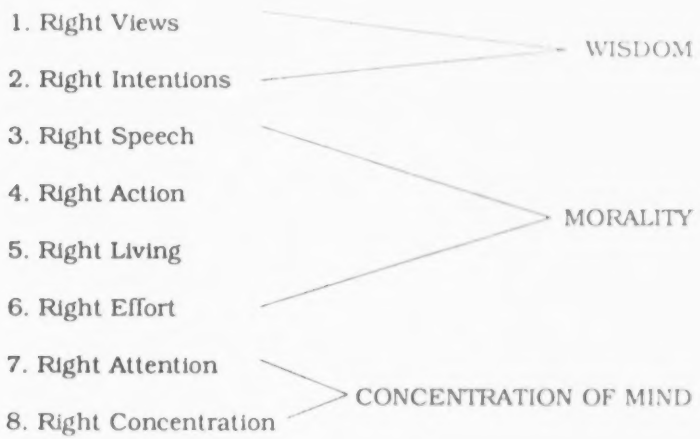
In general, I have the impression that either the Lao Buddhists have not understood the importance of learning, or they did but have chosen to neglect it. There are practically no books in Lao homes. People don't like to read. This general lack of interest in reading among the Lao has done much harm to the development of the Lao literature. The literary skills of the Lao, at the present time, are probably the lowest among Southeast Asian nations. Many of our Lao parents do not seem to be convinced that there is a need for much work and systematic efforts by both student and parent to ensure successful learning. I sincerely think that the popular Lao philosophy of "Wisdom versus Knowledge" is a wrong philosophy. The misinterpretation of Knowledge itself is much to be blamed. There is no substitute

for learning. Wisdom and Knowledge are complementary to each other. There can be no Wisdom without Knowledge.

Therefore, Wisdom and Knowledge should never have been considered as alternative solutions to our mind.

It is obvious that the school, the milestone of the secular education, is rather a new concept to the traditional and cultural heritage of the Lao for whom the only "real" teaching institution is the local Buddhist temple or *wat*. In fact, due to the lack of a better understanding, the secular school is *Hong Hian* in Lao, which literally means *a building for learning*. It is interesting to observe that in the word *Hong Hian*, there is much more emphasis on the shape of the school building than on its function as a teaching institution.

In Buddhism, there is a great difference between wisdom and knowledge. Wisdom is more than knowledge. Concentration of Mind, Morality, and Wisdom are the three parts englobing the Eightfold Path. Buddhism has determined "Ignorance" as the cause for suffering (See Chapter Two on the Four Noble Truths). The Fourth Truths describes the "Way" to Deliverance from Suffering and the Eightfold Path is using the Right Views, i.e. Knowledge to oppose Ignorance. The eight items of the Path are:



However most Lao Buddhists, including the monks themselves, have a minimal doctrinal knowledge. The majority of monks do not understand enough Pali, the language of Buddhist scriptures, and could not, therefore, grasp the essence of the sacred texts. Of course, the average Lao layman understands even less. But there is one *Wat* in nearly every sizable village of Laos.

Chapter XI

THE LAO LITERATURE

In broad terms, the Lao literature derives largely from Indic sources. It is divided into the sacred and the profane. Buddhism dominates the strictly religious literature, but a variety of legends, tales, and poetry are dedicated to the values of Brahmanism. Most of the Lao literary heritage is preserved in written form. There are two writing systems used in recording the Lao literature: the *Tham* alphabets and the *Lao* alphabets. *Tham* is a special Lao sacred script mostly used to record Buddhist texts which are written, usually, in Pali characters. The *Tham* script is rather restricted to the Buddhist temples. The Lao alphabets, on the other hands, represent the national language of Laos, therefore, all of the modern texts are written in the Lao language.

Technically, most of the Buddhist literature and Hindu tales in existence in Laos were originally written on palm leaf manuscripts. The characters were carved into the palm leaf and blackened through the rubbing of the mixture of powdered charcoal. There were 1,163 of such manuscripts counted in the Lao national collection in 1917. However, this number did not include thousands of the manuscripts in private homes and remote pagodas throughout the country. Why are those manuscripts necessary in a country where the illiteracy rate is so high? One of the answers is that most of the Lao believe in supernatural forces; the physical manuscript itself is considered equally powerful if not more powerful than its textual content.

In the Lao tradition, words are very powerful according to their written existence. James R. Chamberlain, an outstanding specialist in the Lao language, once wrote about the power of the palm leaf manuscripts:

> *When invading armies entered a city, one of the first acts was to remove the manuscripts, the heart of the city's power as it were. A chief abbot from northern Thailand once ordered all manuscripts from the temples in his district to be piled in the temple grounds and burned, all the histories, the poetry, the Buddhist texts. The ashes were used to make protective amulets; the sacred power of the words was thus transformed and contained within the amulets.*

Although most of the ancient Lao literature is preserved in written form, the Lao prefer to present their literary legacy orally. Folk tales, proverbs, children's stories, and highly sophisticated poems are all included in the classification of oral literature.

Local variations may be introduced or invented according to the inspiration of the narrator. Many Lao narrators can recite a six-hour-poem (*roman en vers*) entirely from memory. The narrators who possess this kind of recitation skill may hear a new story only once and be able to recite it from memory without major mistakes.

The sung poetry is another form of the very popular oral literature in Laos. It is called *lam* or *khap*. At festivals, "courts of love" were set up in the temple's courtyard in which, sitting in sex-segregated rows, the young people would engage to demonstrate their interest, and to express their affection for each other through the exchanges of poetry and songs. This is an excellent opportunity to excel at recitation. Some *lam* performances are exchanges of skill between a man and a woman. In other types of *lam*, there is no interaction involved and a single performer is in charge of the "show". Still a single performance of the Lao *lam* may last all night. In a few cases, where there are good poets who are in love with each other, the interactions may last up to 72 hours without sleep.

The three important masterpieces of Lao literature are *Vetsantrasadok*, *Sin Say*, and *Thao Hung* or *Khoun Cheuang* (See Chapter Four). *Vetsantrasadok* is the most popular. Every year in Laos, there is a special festival day called the *Boon Mahasat* purposely set to entertain the Lao people through the reading or listening to the Vetsandone story. This is a story dealing with the previous life of the Buddha immediately preceding his rebirth as Prince Gautama. The main theme of the story is the reincarnation process; the chief purpose of reincarnation is education. The basic principle in the Buddhist education is *Dharma*. *Dharma* is the doctrine of virtue and right conduct which implies rights and duties of each individual. The moral law sustains and favors those who abide by it. *Karma* is the instrument which will span this life and the afterdeath, assessing one lifetime to another, rewarding the just and punishing the evil. Ultimately, those who live in harmony with Dharma will reach a state in which rebirth is no longer necessary; that state is *Nirvana*.

Sin Say, the other literary masterpiece, written in the most sophisticated style and in the most exquisite Lao poetic form by the poet Phangkham, is based on an older version. The story of *Sin Say* is also well known in Cambodia and Thailand. Sin Say is the name of a hero who was given the mission to rescue his father's younger sister. The Sin Say story brings us back into the Hindu universe. Since the Indian pantheon is overwhelming in its diversity, there are many gods. Thus, Sin Say was born with a bow and holding arrows in his hand. Then came his brother

Sang Thong, a golden snail. At the same time, their half-brother, an elephant with golden tusks was also born. The story tells how the three brothers defeat the ogre Nhak Koumphan who has stolen their aunt.

Thao Hung, the third Lao literary masterpiece, is non-Buddhist material in nature. Thao Hung, the main character, is not a Lao but a Khom of the Mon-Khmer ethnic group. In fact, characters in *Thao Hung* are of pre-Buddhist origin. *Thao Hung* is a historical epic in nature. There is a rich description of animistic festivals and how sacrifices were offered to spirits. There are no Buddhist precepts being taught or lessons being learned in *Thao Hung*. Because of this, the Buddhist-dominated Lao people think in general that the *Thao Hung* epic should not be read on festival days with the exception of the Rocket Festival which is characterized by much drunkenness and ribaldry. In the old days, the manuscript of *Thao Hung* itself could not be recorded on the palm leaf and had to be scratched on strips of green bamboo. *Thao Hung* is essentially a story of struggles between many branches of a few ruling dynastic families in the ancient times of Indochina. It is not simply an account of battle. Warriors are portrayed with their actions in both a moral and heroic context. The legend of *Thao Hung* is still very much alive among the Mon-Khmer speaking people of Laos and Vietnam. Some do believe that one day Khoun Cheuang will come back and rescue the Khom or Khmu people.

Chapter XII

THE LAO AND THE OUTSIDE WORLD

In spite of a hundred years of foreign involvements in the modern history of the Laotian kingdom, the Lao people know very little about the outside world. The Lao certainly know almost nothing about the great civilizations of the Western world. In fact, the current knowledge of the Lao about the Lao themselves is extremely poor. Our ignorance is very apparent when we Lao come to the cross-cultural section of the multi-ethnic population of Laos. We are ignorant but not indifferent about the matter.

This absence of knowledge of the Lao about the outside world and about themselves is a cumulative effect of many factors combined. The specific geographical position of Laos is partly to be blamed for the existing deplorable situation. On the other hand, Buddhism does not encourage the Lao to seek new explanations of life or to engage in the exploration of other peoples' culture and civilization. But most certainly, I think, the proverbial inertia and incompetence of the Laotian central executive power was the deciding factor limiting the Lao people's access to the major civilization of mankind.

1. *Geographical factors.* Laos covers about 91,000 square miles, or if you prefer, nearly the size of the state of Oregon. Laos is situated between the 15th and 25th parallels north of the equator. There are no railroads. Many roads are closed to communication for six months in every year, and Laos is a matrix of mountains, plateaus, and plains. Most of the Lao live by the rivers in the lowlands, therefore, the Mekong River and its left-bank tributaries serve quite efficiently as a major link of communication among the Lao. However, the Mekong cannot serve as a waterway for an international exchange. There are too many rapids, and the double *Li Phi* Falls near the Cambodian border are impassable at any time of the year.

To the North, Laos borders with Yunnan, a southern province of China. There, across the Chinese border, the Lao do not have much to learn from because the whole area is inhabited by the same minority ethnic groups which have also resettled themselves in Laos. Besides, the Chinese civilization was born and brought up in relative isolation from other civilizations of mankind. China herself has never been an outward-looking country.

The Mekong marks a long boundary with Thailand to the West. Thailand, undoubtedly, is in a better position to understand Westerners, and the ethnic Siamese Thais have considerably modernized their way of life during the last hundred years. But the Lao have had only a limited benefit from the common border with Thailand because the Lao do not have a direct contact with the Siamese Thais. The whole northeastern part of Thailand is inhabited by a population entirely composed of the Lao ethnics who are as little informed as their own brothers and sisters in Laos. The language, values, and living patterns are identical for the people of both sides of the Mekong.

From Cambodia which is to the South, the Lao people have learned a great deal. Most of what the Lao got from the ancient Khmer kingdom constitutes basic elements of the Lao culture up to the present time. Brahmanism, Theravada Buddhism, classical music, and dances all have come to Laos from Cambodia in the distant past. Although contacts between the Lao and Khmer people had been less frequent in modern times, some twenty years ago, many Lao students and aristocrats went to Phnom-Penh for higher education and other professional training.

The Lao would have learned so much from Vietnam which borders with Laos to the east, but the Annam Cordillera is a formidable barrier to communication between the two countries. The Annam Cordillera is a range of mountains with peaks rising to 8,000 feet, thus, forming a natural border line between Laos and Vietnam. Of all the Indochinese peoples, the Vietnamese had been the most exposed to the outside world, both culturally and politically. There had been a thousand years of Chinese domination in Vietnam's history, then came Western power, specifically the French colonial power. The Vietnamese people are quick learners and could therefore assimilate many philosophical thoughts and technical wisdom into their own culture for their own benefits. Confucianism was adopted to cement the kinship between families, thereby preparing a solid foundation for a strong and homogeneous nation. The French language was learned and the romanization of the Vietnamese language was adopted almost instantly. French was the key for Vietnamese intellectuals to explore the civilizations of the Western world. The romanization of the Vietnamese tongue was necessary for a better and easier way of communication among themselves. Anyway, the Lao would still have had to learn the Vietnamese language in order to understand what the Vietnamese themselves have to say. Yes, language is a major obstacle between the two peoples at both sides of the Annam Cordillera.

2. *Religious and educational factors.* Laos is made up of 10,000 small villages. The Lao villagers are committed Theravada Buddhists. There are thousands of pagodas in the Lao country, and the Buddhist monk has traditionally been regarded the best teacher a boy could have. Until very recently, the only formal education in Laos was to be found in the local pagoda. In a Buddhist monastic education, one does not learn about geography nor social science. Much time is devoted to teaching manual arts and reverence for Gautama Buddha and the king. The Buddhist monk also teaches discipline, morality, and respect for elders. His disciples will learn all the practical skills needed in order to become active participants in a traditional Lao village society. Instruction is given orally, with emphasis on memory training. Consequently, after such a school, many who have attended it may tell you much more about the Naga world, the Garuda world, etcetera, but they will have a hard time guessing whether Vietnam is to the north, the south, the left, or the right of their own village.

The French secular school system spread very slowly. The elementary schools were not set up in a significant number until the end of the Second World War. Although the French colonial administrators were in need of secretaries and interpreters, they did not care to educate the Lao people. Subsequently, even after more than fifty years of French domination, only a small proportion of the Lao had actually been exposed to the Western influence to any effective degree. How could it be otherwise when only one senior high school was available in the whole kingdom? The school itself is in the faraway capital city of Vientiane. All the graduation tests had to be flown back to France for final evaluation with the eventual results being communicated to students three months later. Even if some were successful in passing the final tests, there was still little chance for the Lao students to continue their studies. In those days, there was not a single university built in Laos, subsequently, only a handful of children belonging to a few wealthy elite families could afford to go abroad for higher education. This, in my opinion, was the main factor causing the stagnation of the intellectual development of the Lao in the past. After the French departure in 1954 the country's affairs were left to the Lao. The French also left behind many incompetent clerks and interpreters serving their colonial administration. These people were to become the high and highest officials in the newly independent Lao administration. Obviously these officials could not understand the importance of education and the public information system in structuring the course of their nation's destiny. All the consecutive

governments failed to come up with ideas and programs to enhance the social mobility needed for a broad educational opportunity for the Lao middle class. The Lao aristocracy itself had only a few Western educated and Western oriented intellectuals. On the other hand, the lives of the common people had been plagued with all kinds of insecurities. The civil war of the last three decades was another factor causing a very high illiteracy rate in the country. Therefore, the effectiveness of the printed word had to be severely limited under those circumstances. Verbal communication is the most important source of information to the majority of the Lao. However, the public information system itself is quite primitive and doesn't provide the Lao people with programs which inform them about the outside world. As a result, the world view of many Lao does not extend much beyond the few hundred square miles where they are to work and live. This is not a cynical statement but a factual situation of our realities.

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